

# Just Like Fairy Prince, Said the Ballet Beauties

Famous Stars of Moscow Ballet,  
Once Toast of Empire,  
Rescued from Suffering by  
American Who Braved Many  
Dangers to Send Them Relief



By Morris Gest.

[Editor's Note:—There is good cause for the beautiful members of the ballet, which in the old days was such an ornament to the famous great State Theater at Moscow, to say of Morris Gest of New York: "He has been to us just like a Fairy Prince."]

More than any other Russian class, these fair and fragile young women have suffered from the changing conditions and the national want in Russia.

Mr. Gest tells on this page how he sent these dainty sufferers, and even the men of the Russian theater, food from America.

His father, Leon Gerstnowitz, was before the revolution a prosperous manufacturing chemist in Odessa, a "gold license" merchant, who had the Czar's permission to live any place in the empire, a privilege few Jews enjoyed. The son ran away to come to America when he was 12 years old.

He soon found his way to the stage and from an association with Oscar Hammerstein he graduated into the firm Comstock & Gest and became the producer of the most elaborate stage spectacles of the American stage—"Experience," "The Wanderer," "Chu Chin Chow," "Aphrodite," "Mecca" and others.]

THE artists of the Russian Theater are starving! That was the distressing news that reached me one day last November. It came in the form of a cable from Moscow from Herbert Hoover's representatives in the American Relief Administration. Arriving in Russia in the late summer and fall, these men had turned their hands first of all to the relief of the general famine situation. When that work was under way they found time to observe that some classes were suffering more bitterly than others. And foremost among these classes were the men and women and children of the stage.

"Conditions of operatic and theatrical artists," said the cable, "including students in national theatrical schools and conservatories in Moscow and Petrograd, are appalling. They are endeavoring to

maintain high standards, but lack of food makes this difficult. Some of the best actors and operatic singers work all day as common laborers at docks and elsewhere in order to sustain life, then sing grand opera at night. Government here doing everything possible to assist in maintaining entire educational system for the artists, but success in maintaining theaters, opera, schools, &c., due solely to enthusiasm and personal sacrifices of artists and directors. Could you interest theater managers, wealthy actors, singers and patrons of opera to buy food drafts to be distributed under our supervision?"

That cable was addressed to George Barr Baker, head of Mr. Hoover's New York office. I had met Commander Baker in Europe last year while I was trying in vain to get news of my parents in Russia. He knew that I was a Russian by birth, an American by adoption. He knew that I retained a deep interest in my native land, that I had brought many of its artists to this country and that I would probably feel most keenly for their present suffering. And so he asked me to organize the appeal for funds. I was in the midst of the most disastrous season the American theater has ever had. I had lost a fortune in a few short months. But through the generosity of various friends of the Russian arts and a number of prominent actors and managers I was able to gather a substantial sum of money. I turned this over to Commander Baker just a few days before he set out for Moscow on a personal errand to supervise Mr. Hoover's relief work.

The hunger and hardships of the artists of the stage were appalling, said the cablegram. Just how appalling they were I had no idea until Commander Baker's return a few days ago. Since then I have heard him speak a number of times in public and in private, and this is the story of cheating frightful famine of its prey in the nick of time, as he told it to me.

In the old days the life of the artists of the theater and the opera and the ballet in Moscow and Petrograd was an enviable one.

To-day all that is changed. Life is a

continual and hopeless struggle for the barest necessities of food and clothing. What chance has art when the sole topic of conversation is bread where two or more are gathered together? The pearls and the furs are gone—gone to buy a few crusts of bread. The sleighs and the droshkies are gone or the price for a ride in them is too fabulous for the artists to afford them.

Consider the plight of two married artists whose combined salaries are 2,000,000 rubles a month when to-day's prices in Moscow are: A pound of sugar, 110,000 rubles; a bottle of milk, 13,000 rubles; a pound of bread, 35,000 rubles; one egg, 7,500 rubles; one pound of meat, 35,000 rubles; one pound of butter, 110,000 rubles! And then remember that decent boots cost 1,500,000 rubles; ladies' boots, 4,000,000 rubles; 5,000,000 rubles; stockings, 4,000,000 rubles, and other articles of clothing, when obtainable at all, in proportion. Actresses and dancers are reduced to wearing gowns made of velvet curtains or of tablecloths!

It is no wonder that Commander Baker reports seeing a group of performers on the stage at the Great State Theater in Moscow with insufficient flesh on the bones of all of them put together to make one fairly plump person. It is no wonder that he reports that each of the artists has to have a substitute standing in the wings ready to take his place if he falls from exhaustion and hunger. Every night numerous players have to be replaced in this way. But with dogged persistence the performance goes on.

In Moscow, conditions are better than in the Volga cities such as Samara and Kazan. That is, they are—yet. No one knows how long they will continue so. At least there is probably no cannibalism in Moscow, as there is in the Volga valley. At least, not yet. But, as Commander Baker says, absolute starvation has its advantages over hunger that persists day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. And people have been incessantly hungry in Moscow and Petrograd now for years. It is a living death, which is more terrible than death itself.

Shortly after Commander Baker's return



a parcel arrived from Moscow containing over five hundred letters written on all sorts of scraps of paper and expressing the deep gratitude of the artists of the opera and the theatre for the aid which had been sent to them. The eagerness with which their thankfulness was conveyed could not have been more spontaneous if they had unexpectedly received reprieve from a death sentence.

The news of the frightful famine which has made Russia a grim and terrible graveyard came as a stunning personal blow to me. In spite of my solicitude for the Russian artists I naturally thought first of all of my parents, hopelessly shut off from all means of assistance. I thought of my brothers and sisters and their families. What was happening to them? Were they getting enough to eat or were they starving like the rest? Did they have enough clothing to keep them warm or were they freezing to death in dirty rags? There was no way to find out what they were suffering, no way to send aid to them. And the thought that I was helpless nearly drove me to distraction.

As the long years of the revolution passed I renewed my efforts to get some news of my parents. Each failure spurred me on and increased my anxiety. I tried through our own Government. I tried through Lloyd George and Lady Astor. I tried through London and Paris, through Berlin and Constantinople. Finally, last year, I went abroad myself, determined to pass all frontiers and break down all barriers and see the truth for myself. I managed with difficulty to get to Bucharest in Rumania, and even on to Kishineff, then under Rumanian jurisdiction. There I trusted a substantial sum of money to a man who owned three newspapers and who promised to carry it through the lines to my people in the famine stricken area. I had to come back home and trust to fortune, but I have learned since that my courier never arrived.

Soon after that one of my sisters arrived in Warsaw, a physical and nervous wreck, reduced in weight to fifty-eight pounds. I met Commander Baker in Paris about that time. He had left the navy to join the staff of Herbert Hoover. I showed him the pho-

tograph of my sister and the letter I had received from her and he promised to do what he could.

Months passed. A letter came from Constantinople, from an American who had seen my people in Odessa. They were alive—but just barely alive and facing starvation. I spent sleepless nights. Then one day, about six weeks ago, I heard through Commander Baker that one of his men had reached my parents with food and clothing.

Two weeks later I received the first letter from my mother in over four years. It was written on sixteen scraps of paper of all sizes and kinds—whatever she could lay hands on. It took her many days to finish it, for she was without glasses of any kind. Food had reached her at last. Food and clothing. And my father and mother and my brothers and sisters still remaining in Russia were saved at the door of death. For over a year and nine months none of them had seen or tasted a scrap of white bread or fat of any kind or sugar or milk. Seventeen of them, men, women and children, were living in a single room out of the fifty-four which my father used to have in his factory. My mother couldn't even leave the house when the news of the arrival of the food came, for she had nothing to wear but a garment made out of an old potato sack.

Balleff and the Chauve-Souris are closely linked with my efforts to locate my own people and with my attempt to aid the starving artists of Russia. It was while I was in Europe searching for my parents that I saw Balleff at the Theater Femina in Paris and determined to bring the Chauve-Souris to this country. And I believed that Balleff would do more than any one else to bring America and Russia into closer understanding and sympathy. He might not be appreciated. He might not pay for his keep. But I could no more pass by the chance than I could cease trying to send help to my starving parents. If I couldn't reach them at least I could do the thing which would prove to them, if they ever lived to hear about it, that I still cherished their inspiration.

Well, Balleff and the Chauve-Souris came. And they conquered. And they are

still conquering American friendship for far away and troubled Russia. I frankly believe that the Chauve-Souris is more responsible than any other single element for the returning wave of sympathy for the Russian people which is sweeping over this country to-day, and which is taking the form of all kinds of benefits and funds to aid the starving millions and to back up the splendid work which Herbert Hoover and the American Relief Administration is doing. America has a natural kinship with Russia. Both countries and both peoples are extremely democratic. But through misunderstanding and through distance and blockade the two peoples had been drawn apart.

To-day the bond of sympathy and understanding between America and Russia is being firmly knit together again. There is a Russian fad in dressing. There is a widespread interest in Russian art, in Russian music, in Russian operas, in Russian literature. All those signs point to renewed sympathy and understanding. And the Chauve-Souris should receive much of the credit for this change of heart. The Chauve-Souris discloses the human, light-hearted Russia, the Russia that can laugh, the courageous Russia that can laugh even while loved ones at home are in distress. I wish every one who sees Balleff and his artists could know how many food packages each of the members of the company sends back home every week!

Above—Kandaurova, said to be the most beautiful of the members of the Moscow Ballet. At top—The famous Mikail Mordkin and his wife, Margareta Forman, famous in America as dancers, both reported recently to be starving in Russia. To the right of Mr. Gest—Mlle. Alice Koonen in her famous dance, "The Veil of Pierette," who went without food for days until Mr. Gest's contribution reached her. Below her—The Great State Theater in Moscow, the home of the ballet, whose members Mr. Gest saved from starvation.